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NUTRITION COMMITTEE NEWS

For exchange of information on nutrition education and school lunch activities

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PLANNING NUTRITION PROGRAMS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Many school administrators are interested in ongoing programs of applied nutrition for school children but recognize that elementary school teachers may have a limited background in nutrition and in adapting nutrition information to classroom activities. Some administrators have arranged short workshops to provide teachers with the necessary materials of instruction, including nutrition information, education approaches, and visuals. Both administrators and teachers, in some instances, have concluded that this is not sufficient.

In recent months, some of our readers have received requests from curriculum directors for assistance in developing more effective inservice nutrition programs for their elementary school teachers. These workers have appealed to us for guidelines in planning such programs.

In this issue of NCN, we offer some suggestions based on recent visits to schools in four cities and on programs offered to elementary school teachers elsewhere.

DETERMINING CONTENT OF TEACHERS' PROGRAMS

Needs of Children

The objectives of any good nutrition program for children are based on the nutritional and developmental needs of the particular children being taught. In meeting these needs, consideration must be given to such factors as the economic levels of the families, cultural backgrounds represented, and the available food supply.

Regardless of the specific nutritional and other needs of the children, constructive programs will include activities to help children to (1) develop or maintain wholesome attitudes toward foods, (2) establish and/or maintain desirable eating habits, (3) gain an increasing understanding of the advantages of good nutrition for people of all ages, and (4) learn how good nutrition may be achieved through wise food selection.

Teacher Background Necessary

Because children are likely to learn more readily from the example set for them than by what they are told, it is important for the teacher to have good eating habits and wholesome attitudes toward food himself. He must be convinced that all food is good and that advantages accrue to those who achieve good nutrition for themselves through wise food selection. The teacher must also be willing to taste unfamiliar foods and to increase, if possible, the variety of foods he eats with enjoyment.

Conviction and enthusiasm are contagious. If the teacher is apathetic and unconvinced that food makes a difference to health, this, too, is contagious. Therefore, *any good program must begin with an informed, enthusiastic teacher.*

Sound information. Teachers need a core of accurate, up-to-date nutrition knowledge, but they certainly should not be expected to be nutrition specialists. They are, and should be, specialists in dealing with children. Good programs can result if teachers have some basic information about (1) functions of nutrients and the fact that they are interrelated, (2) the nutritive value of commonly used foods, (3) how children and adults can achieve good nutrition from a wide variety of food combinations, and (4) the use of simple food guides.

Techniques. (1) *Determining what the content of classroom programs should be.* If good programs depend on giving appropriate emphasis to the strengths and weaknesses of children's diets, teachers need to know their responsibilities in learning of the strengths and weaknesses. Teachers cannot be expected to do the whole job, however simplified, because time consumed could not be justified in terms of the whole curriculum.

Studies in many schools reveal that the teacher is the best person to gather information regarding the kinds and amounts of food eaten by children in his class. His observations in the classroom, on the playground, and in the

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school lunch can be compared with the information children give by interview or on food record forms. Added to this, his knowledge of individual children and his contacts with parents tend to produce the most accurate possible picture of the diet patterns represented in his class.

Interpretation of this information and recommendations for emphases should be made by someone with a more comprehensive background in nutrition — the specialist. This can be done by the person or persons who are working in a consultant capacity to supply nutrition principles and to interpret new knowledge as it is established. Some communities (NCN July-August 1960 — Hugo, Oklahoma) have received help in tabulating and interpreting information from nutritionists and statisticians in their State universities.

(2) *Adapting nutrition information to suitable classroom activities.* Nutrition cuts across many areas of learning such as health, science, and social studies. Activities in these subjects can be enriched by adding a nutritional aspect. This practice has the added advantage of presenting nutrition in a social situation—which is conducive to learning. At the same time, it does not require large allocations of time in an already crowded curriculum.

Teachers often need help until they develop facility in presenting nutrition information in a manner consistent with the interests and maturity of the children. They also may need assistance in integrating this information into classroom activities in the appropriate areas of learning.

There are activities, developed and integrated into existing curriculums and tested in schools, that are helpful in (a) learning about the eating habits of children, (b) increasing the variety of foods children will eat, (c) promoting and maintaining desirable eating habits, (d) convincing boys and girls that food makes a difference in the health of individuals, and (e) providing students with accurate nutrition information.

Many of these activities have been described in some detail in earlier issues of Nutrition Committee News (Mar.-Apr. 1955, July-Aug. 1959, Mar.-Apr. 1960, May-June 1960, Sept.-Oct. 1961, Nov.-Dec. 1961).

(3) *Making good use of the school lunch experience.* The school lunch has an excellent potential for helping children develop and maintain good eating habits. Here children can have the repeated experience with the desirable practices essential to good habit formation. Elementary school children also need to participate in activities that relate school lunch to other areas of the curriculum. This experience helps them realize that the development of good food practices is an important part of their education—of growing up.

Simple food waste studies and class menu planning are among the activities that have been used with success in the elementary school. Field trip experiences, already a part of the elementary school curriculum, have included visits to the school kitchen. Such cooperative activities help bridge the gap which often exists between school lunch staff and other school personnel. Both groups have an opportunity to share objectives, procedures, and problems. Increased understanding usually results, and the total school lunch program is upgraded.

Observations in the school lunch over an extended period also provide good data for assessing the progress of the nutrition program.

(4) *Working with parents.* Poor communication causes much of the dissatisfaction parents express with school programs of any kind. When parents fully understand that the school has to be concerned about the health of children, but intends to assume a supportive role, cooperation usually increases appreciably. Teachers need to know what their responsibilities are in promoting this understanding and cooperation.

Most administrators and teachers already have effective means of communicating with the homes and the community. These should be used whenever possible to keep parents informed of the progress of nutrition programs.

For example, food records should be taken only after parents have been informed of the reason for such action, and how the results will be used. This kind of communication is usually best handled by the administrator.

Teachers can handle the progress reports to parents as they contract them for other reasons. Often classroom activities are enriched by inviting parents to attend and see for themselves how children are being helped to develop good attitudes and habits.

At times it is necessary to make special contact with parents to enlist their cooperation. Parents may need a demonstration on ways to include some nutrient found to be in short supply in children's diets. Someone skilled in demonstrating and knowledgable in nutrition should take this responsibility.

Nutritionists or advanced students from nearby universities, community agencies, or the home economics teacher with a foods and nutrition major are best fitted for this.

In this area, the teacher has a coordinating function in addition to his direct responsibility for communicating with parents. He is closest to the children, their progress, and their immediate needs. Thus, he is in a position to know when and what kind of communication is necessary and to make the necessary referrals.

(5) *Knowledge of community resources.* All communities do not have the same resources, but teachers and administrators should know how to make the best use of those available.

There may be sources of consultant help—nutritionists in public health or welfare agencies, Extension service, or

industry sponsored programs. These individuals might not be available on short notice or be able to come every time they are asked. They might, however, be available later.

Retired but active professionals, hired on a part-time basis, have been an asset to school lunch programs by working with children during the lunch period. This has relieved classroom teachers who otherwise would have had continuous responsibility for children.

Food merchants will often plan with teachers for children to visit and learn about the variety of food available in their own communities. Most food merchants, if they understand what the school is trying to do will display posters in their stores and often will allow exhibits to be placed in their store windows to help acquaint parents with the concepts taught in the schools.

Community organizations may help in contacting parents not easily reached by usual means of communication. In some instances, community groups have made special activities possible by providing the necessary funds. They have also provided transportation to some processing plant where children could gain firsthand knowledge of how a particular food is made ready for consumer use.

How to evaluate effectiveness of classroom programs in improving eating habits. We are really attempting to measure change. Lasting change is an extremely slow process and often is barely noticeable within a short time. Radical change, accomplished quickly, is seldom lasting. It is very important that we discriminate between the two and measure only that change which has a potential for continuation.

A study of food records taken at the start of the school year compared with a similar study 6 weeks later, tells us little. If a comparison is made at the end of the academic year, we have a better picture. However, we also must look elsewhere for signs of improvement.

These signs of improvement include: (1) Steady growth among children as revealed by health records, (2) a decrease in 1-day and half-day absences, (3) fewer minor illnesses causing children to be sent home from school, (4) a decrease in food waste in the school lunch, and (5) improvement in general academic standing. We may not find all of these signs but the more we find, the surer we can be that progress is being made.

GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING TEACHERS' PROGRAMS

Some colleges and universities offer courses in the teaching of nutrition for nonmajors. Teachers within commuting distance of these institutions have the opportunity to upgrade their nutrition background with relative ease. Other teachers are not so fortunate; if they wish to take the same course, it means a substantial investment of time and money and, in many cases, the credits cannot be applied toward the next degree. Administrators who are interested in initiating ongoing programs may want to consider some other means of helping teachers prepare themselves—perhaps a program offered locally.

Preliminary Planning

In planning programs for teachers, it is wise to be constantly mindful of our concept of desirable background for teachers. We must recognize, however, that although teacher background for teaching nutrition may be limited, it is certainly not wholly lacking. The emphases in any program should be placed on the areas of need.

For example, a group of teachers may, on the whole, have excellent attitudes and good eating habits. They may also be successful in communicating and working with parents. These teachers may be quite limited in basic nutrition information and how to adapt it to the classroom activities. For these teachers, major emphasis would be placed here.

Even though teachers have already worked in this area—many have participated in workshops, institutes, and courses—it is well to have all teachers who will be concerned with ongoing programs for children using consistent terminology, placing emphasis on the known needs of the children, and planning activities around our best knowledge of nutrition at this time.

Some means of providing teachers with sound, up-to-date nutrition information and of orienting new teachers to the objectives and procedures of the program should be included in the initial planning. The teacher or supervisor best qualified in nutrition and teaching methods has assumed this responsibility in some schools.

Materials' kits? Workshops? Study group? Course? What shall it be?

Observation in numerous schools and reports of teachers indicate that little is gained by simply supplying materials to teachers without interpretation or some detailed directions for their use.

Teachers, however, make excellent use of materials they collect as a result of participating in meetings or courses that emphasize interpretation of these materials and how they can best be used in classroom situations.

Workshops,—1 or 2 days—are an excellent means of (1) providing intepretation of new knowledge as it is established, (2) exchanging information on classroom activities—successes and failures, (3) strengthening any one area in background, and (4) reviewing materials in terms of usability at various grade levels.

Helping teachers develop a common background for teaching nutrition to children appears to be best handled over a longer period. In this way classroom activities can

be initiated while teachers have easy access to consultant help as they gain (1) facility in conducting this kind of activity and (2) help in interpreting changes they observe.

This program may be a course taught by someone proficient in the science of nutrition and in educational approaches appropriate for the elementary school or it may be a study group made up of teachers and other specialists in the several necessary areas.

The course is usually given under the auspices of a college or university and carries college credit—30 hours or 2 credits. The study group is a program offered locally in which school and community resource persons pool their competencies to achieve the same objectives. The person with the most comprehensive background in nutrition assumes leadership. Programs of this nature benefit both teachers and learners because mutual understanding and cooperation generally result.

Study Group Program

When nutrition courses for teachers are not easily available, programs planned to extend their background in nutrition and in adapting nutrition classroom activities are still possible. The community may have one or more nutrition workers (public health nutritionists, Extension nutrition specialists, nutritionists with one of the industry sponsored groups, researchers) who would be willing to meet with school personnel to provide accurate nutrition information and to coordinate school nutrition activities with those of other community groups.

The school, on the other hand, may have a person trained in the preparation and use of visuals who could make a fine contribution. Many schools have teachers with exceptional ability in communicating and working with parents. Most schools have teachers with strong background in the various subject matter areas, such as science, social studies, health, and home economics, who would be willing to participate in group study work. They would work with the nutritionist to develop demonstrations of classroom activities with a nutritional aspect.

For example, the science teacher collaborating with the nutrition worker might plan to present science activities appropriate for various grade levels that can be used to emphasize a nutritional concept.

One activity would be a project on growing a food plant. This will demonstrate the need for water, light, and good soil if good growth and yield are to result. This can be related to the need for wise food selection if children are to attain good health and growth. For younger children, caring for the plants and observing their growth can be simply related to their need for many different good foods. Preparing the vegetable and tasting it provides an opportunity to increase the variety of food children will eat.

A nutrition specialist might plan to present appropriate nutrition information for teachers and to demonstrate—by means of some class projects or exercises—how it applies to both teacher and pupils.

For example, teachers may be asked to record their own food intake for perhaps 3 days. These records can be used in the discussion of the various nutrients and why they must all be included. They can also be used in discussions relating to meeting nutritional needs through wise food selection and the use of food guides.

The specialist might also plan to present basic concepts appropriate to various grade levels. Principles of this nature—tested in schools—were reported in some detail in the May-June 1960 issue of NCN which was prepared by Professor Clara Mae Taylor of Teachers College, Columbia University.

It is helpful to have a nutrition educator review the completed plans, particularly if none of the specialists have ever participated in this kind of program. Such a review—by a person experienced in school nutrition programs—would assure inclusion of information and activities that had proved effective in other school situations.

IN CONCLUSION

We have indicated that effective programs begin with interested and informed teachers. Participation in study groups, courses, workshops, and the like has been effective in helping teachers develop nutrition background necessary to contribute to good programs for children.

Voluntary participation often depends on motivating teachers to investigate the advantages—to both teachers and children—of good school nutrition programs. One way to do this is to make nutrition programs for teachers convenient and economical.

For example, many school systems require teachers to take supplementary course work to be eligible for regular salary increases—example, 2 college credits every 3 years.

Some school administrators have been willing to accept participation in well-planned seminars and study groups in lieu of the college credits. If good nutrition programs could be offered to satisfy this requirement, they would probably be well attended. Teachers who might not otherwise be reached, would have an opportunity to appreciate the value of integrating nutrition into school programs.

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